

Christianity's Pagan Roots - Atheist Scholar

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This lecture will discuss the pagan roots of the Christian Church. We shall discuss how most of the present-day rituals, vestments, holy objects, liturgy, and sermons of the Christian Church were rooted in the pagan cultures of the ancient world. Most of these customs were developed after the death of the apostles. I have already visited Jesus' pagan roots (see [*The Pagan Roots of Mary and Jesus*](#) and the bibliography below) in an earlier lecture, but I believe that it is important for atheists to learn, or to advance their knowledge, about the facts of the specific borrowings the Christian Church made from the pagan culture that it ultimately helped destroy. It is also important to learn some of the reasons for this theft from the earlier pagan culture.

I believe that it is necessary to help reveal what contemporary Christianity seeks to hide, just as the earlier Christian Church tried to claim that its religion was unique. There were a great deal of studies and books in the later 19th and early 20th century on the topic of the pagan roots of Christianity. At that time, there was a consensus among many respected scholars that acknowledged the Church's borrowing from pagan religions, both the civil state religion and the mystery cults so popular during the Hellenistic Age which lasted from about 323 CE to 31 CE.

However, from about the middle 20th century to the present day, a new scholarship has sprung up which attempts to deny Christianity's dependence on earlier traditions, particularly the pagan tradition. This denial of Christianity's origins has put the secular community too much on the defensive and chilled research. The secular scholarly community has been bold when it disputes the religious with science, but apparently not engaged enough in the study of early Church history to assert that Christianity is not unique, that every aspect of it had its roots in earlier religious practices. Fortunately, quite a few secular scholars have undertaken to remedy this gap, particularly concerning the relationship of Jesus to other dying and reviving gods.

I do not know what motivates those scholars who attempt to deny Jesus' relationship to other dying and reviving gods of the ancient world. Many of them

would have us believe that the bread and wine of the Christian communal sacrament, the Eucharist, is not similar to the Hellenistic communal meals of the mystery cults. I cannot say whether these people are motivated by sincere conviction, or an attempt to carve out a place in academe with a different theory from older ones. It is impossible to gauge their sincerity or motives but easy to judge their accuracy. They are wrong. They are wrong in both their hypotheses and conclusions.

In the 90's, Jonathan D. Smith wrote an important article on "Dying and Reviving Gods" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, in which he made the claim that there were important differences between the various pagan savior gods of the mystery cults and Jesus. Yes, of course there were differences, but there were many differences between all the dying and reviving gods, as one would expect, given that the belief in each one arose in different cultures with different customs and traditions.

Earlier, H. Frankfort and others attempted to undermine the important theory about dying and reviving gods in Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890). Since the 1970's, the School of Rome has also attempted to compromise the idea of the resemblance of Christianity to the mystery cults, but has retained thematic unity by adapting Frazer's dying and reviving gods theory.

There has also been an egregious attempt to claim that the Hellenistic mystery religions did not emphasize the promise of an afterlife for their devotees. Such schools of thought try to make the claim that members of such cults were more motivated by the ecstatic moments of bliss experienced while attending their worship services than by the deferred promise of, and the desire for, an afterlife. Hugh Bowden's 2012 *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, has put forth the same claim- that hope of sharing in the resurrection of their god and attaining eternal life was not a particular concern of members of pagan mystery cults.

The point of such denials seems to be the desire to distinguish Christianity as somehow different and unique from the earlier pagan religions and mystery cults. Scholars who try to advance such notions emphasize the Judaic roots of Christianity, and by all means possible, try to minimize any strong similarity of Christianity with the mystery religions of the Hellenistic world and earlier. Christianity was not unique. It was not even particularly important in the Roman Empire until Constantine became its emperor in 312 BC and made the Christian religion, in practice if not by title, the imperial religion. We shall discuss some of his reasons for doing so in a little while.

Christianity was not unique in offering immortal life to its members. In the 2001 *Jesus Mysteries*, the authors, Freke and Gandy, quote poem after poem, entreaty after entreaty, ritual after ritual, which demonstrate that those devoted to Isis/Osiris, Cybele/Attis, Dionysius and so on, expected to share in their god's divine resurrection and everlasting life. Freke and Gandy are not the only scholars to understand how important immortality was to members of the mystery cults and to earlier believers in Orpheus, Osiris and or in Dionysius.

I would like to review some of the information from my earlier [*Pagan Roots of Mary and Jesus*](#) lecture, as it is important to understand what Frazer and other scholars had discovered. In his *Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer put forward the theory that many dying gods and heroes, who he called, "dying and reviving gods," were modeled on the spirit of vegetation, its cycles of death and rebirth. He explained that many ancient religions of the Mediterranean and elsewhere were based on the vegetative cycle of the earth. The vegetation of our world flourished and grew in the spring and summer, came to fruition and then withered in the fall, became dormant, or seemed to die, in the winter. The entire cycle was repeated every year. The daylight also waned with the winter solstice, and then waxed after that period. In the agricultural era, the crops were seen as dead, or dormant, when planted in the ground, and then they sprouted once again, or became resurrected once more.

The earliest manifestations in the form of rites that eventually became mystery cults were likely to have been in honor of seasonal changes and/or the purpose of bringing these changes about.

At some stage, the king of his group would have been put to death, and a new king would be "raised" in his place and be the new consort of the queen. There would have often been the use of a surrogate for the king, someone who would be the "King for a Day," and then be sacrificed, with the old king resuming his throne for another year.

The early rituals were likely to have been satisfying for people for a long while, particularly when humans were tied to the land. But at some point, the more thoughtful among them would think of raising the spiritual level of the reward. They would puzzle over the means to share in the nature of their king, or their god, in the resurrection rite. It is important for us to keep in mind that even very early people would have a strong desire to share in their god's resurrection. During the great period of cosmopolitan trade and economic advances, when people had increasing social mobility in the aforementioned Hellenistic Era, they felt the need

for some sort of cultural and ethnic identity to replace the stability of the societies they had left behind.

Robert Price explains: "...the older mystery cults would be the esoteric core of a traditional religion whose exoteric concern was the renewal of the fields in the spring." But the exoteric purpose of the mystery cults fell away during the Hellenistic era, leaving the core worship of the resurrected god, the Kyrios, or Lord. The esoteric core of those religions included not only ecstatic understanding of the secret rites, but an expectation of the members' eventual sharing in their god's resurrection. Please see my lecture on Jesus and Mary's pagan roots for a discussion of some of the dying and reviving gods and their mythical narratives.

My listeners will be able to discern the elements from them that drifted into the Christ myth and the Christian cult, particularly the Kyrios Christos sect. The lecture I have just referred to also discusses some elements of the rituals of those mystery religions, which are hard to find, as initiates were vowed to secrecy, and the ascendant Christian Church did its best to destroy any knowledge of the rites. As I have mentioned, some of the dying and reviving gods were Dionysius, Attis, Mithras, Jesus, Osiris and Adonis.

The mythologists claim that Jesus was never a historical person, but a fiction, closely related to the above mentioned dying and reviving gods. In 2012, the respected scholar, Bart D. Ehrman wrote a volume, *Did Jesus Exist?* In his book, he restated ideas from some of his earlier works, making the claim that Jesus did exist as a historical personage, an apocalyptic preacher, and attempting to discredit the mythologists. There have been many volumes from the mythologist school, refuting Ehrman's point of view. One of the most important is *In Quest of the Historic Jesus of Nazareth*, 2013, with such authors as Robert Price, Earl Doherty, and Richard Carrier disputing Ehrman's notions quite vigorously.

Hugh Bowden has gone further than such writers as Ehrman. He has made the claim that Christianity was a doctrinal religion rather than an ecstatic one, and therefore very different from the mystery religions. But the early Christian Church was composed of many different strains. It took centuries to evolve and crystallize doctrine. The Gnostic element was very strong in early Christianity. Gnostics were less interested in the dogma and doctrine of an institutionalized religion, but focused on ways to find each individual's own god within.

Gnosis means knowledge, or self-knowledge, and the Gnostics sought to achieve recognition and union with the inner light of the self.

There was a sense that the spiritual path was composed of remembering or perceiving, of reuniting the fragmental material and the spiritual self, of perceiving the One in the All. Obviously seekers of spiritual truth and inner light are on an individual path of understanding. To many of the Gnostics, most of the mystery narratives and the Christian myths were not literal but allegorical. If such hints were interpreted properly and followed correctly, the Gnostic member could become a Christ, one who knows the entire Gnosis of the Whole. In the Gnostic Gospel of Phillip, Jesus proclaims: "You saw the Spirit, you became Spirit. You saw the Father; you shall become the Father."

The important point to keep in mind is that during the early years of the Christian Church, Gnostics were Christians. Elaine Pagels, one of the most eminent and respected experts on Gnosticism, has explained that in the early Church, both those who took the Biblical narratives literally and those who looked for knowledge within, were baptized Christians, who went to the same churches. They had not yet been differentiated. Let us keep in mind, too, as I have mentioned, that it took many centuries to fix doctrine. The Church councils, from the time of Constantine, through the Middle Ages and beyond, met and solidified doctrine, and made it a crime to differ from their official decisions. Prior to the crystallization of its dogma, Christianity was a very fluid religion. Eventually, Gnosticism, which was a formidable competitor to what was seen as mainstream Christianity, was branded a heresy and its followers were persecuted, hunted down and killed.

The Christian Church, following a path of doctrine and dogma, could not tolerate members seeking an inner light.

So for some scholars to claim that the Church was a doctrinal religion from its inception is somewhat disingenuous. It is apparent from its own history that Christianity became a doctrinal religion over a very long space of time. The aforementioned Gnostics and the specific Christ cult of the Kyrios Christos were very similar. Both were in competition with the other mystery religions that also worshipped gods and goddesses, called Lords and Ladies, and gave suppers that their worshippers attended. There were several Christ cults during the Hellenistic Age, but the one we are focusing on in this lecture is the Kyrios Christos cult. Kyrios Christos would translate as Lord Christ. I am not discussing the Judaic contribution to the Christ myth in this lecture, although it was quite significant. That will be a topic for a future talk.

During this lecture, I want to emphasize the lengths to which some Christian proponents will go to deemphasize the resemblance of the Christian Church to the

pagan civic and mystery religions. It is they who go into the seminal Jewish roots of Christianity, but disingenuously dismiss the Church's pagan origins. But we shall see what still remains of paganism in the Christian churches of today. I am going to undertake a meandering path through the establishment of certain practices and customs that many assume were unique to the Christian Church. The lecture will argue that such was not the case. I am omitting what the Christians borrowed from the Judaic tradition simply because it is too far outside the scope of this lecture's time restraints and intellectual emphasis.

I would like to begin this section on the worship practices of the Christian churches with Constantine, who became Roman emperor in 312 CE. By 324 CE, he became the head of the entire Roman Empire. It was shortly after this event that he began to order the building of churches. There has been a great deal of controversy concerning whether or not Constantine was a Christian. There are biographers who claim that he was and others who maintain that he was merely acting out of policy. Whether he was a believing Christian or not, he was a skillful politician, who decided to promote Christianity as an informal state religion. The old pagan state religion had become a pro forma, non inspiring belief system. Many citizens had in effect deserted it for the more charismatic mystery cults.

The Christian religion had been growing prior to Constantine's ascent. In a few cities it was followed by a slim majority of people. However, in the West, only a small fraction of people embraced it. After Constantine's Edict of Milan, in 313 CE, which granted freedom of religion to all citizens (but atheists were not mentioned) it was understood that Christianity would no longer be persecuted. Observing Constantine's favor extended to the Christian religion, people began flocking to become baptized members. The priesthood was declared exempt from taxes, and there were substantial advantages for Christian lay persons, as well, who began to enjoy monetary and career rewards. Constantine had decided on Christianity as a viable new state religion. He was trying to promote unity in the empire and he believed a new state religion would be a unifying force.

As history shows, however, the Christians were so given to infighting and dissension, Constantine had to step in many times to chastise them and settle their disputes, as in the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, where the nature of god was first made a doctrine. Different versions of god's nature were declared heresy.

Constantine himself never abandoned pagan customs, but began to meld them with the new religion. Constantine worshipped the ancient Sun God, and had that image placed on his coins. He had his likeness placed on the head of the statue of

the sun god he erected in his new capital, Constantinople. He also erected a statue of the Great Mother Goddess, Cybele, showing her in an attitude of prayer. The Christian Church also adopted syncretic practices. Indeed, it had already incorporated paganism, as it endeavored to bring Gentiles into its membership. Most of these Gentiles were pagans, and the churchmen shrewdly arranged matters so the new people would feel comfortable with finding old customs and old gods in the form of saints in the new religion.

In 321 CE, Sunday was decreed by the Emperor as an official day of rest. It is believed by many scholars that he may have been honoring Mithras, whose religion had a large following, especially among the army. Mithras was associated with the sun god. Hugh Bowden's volume states that St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was built on top of a Mithraic temple. It was definitely erected over the remains of a pagan temple, and excavations of St. Peter's uncovered a mosaic depicting Christ as the unconquered sun. Constantine brought pagan statues to decorate Constantinople and retained the title of Pontifex Maximus, chief of priests, pagan priests. By the 15th Century, Constantine's title became the honorific title for the Roman Catholic Pope.

The Emperor also made use of pagan magic formulas to heal diseases and protect the crops.

The pagans believed in holy places, sites where different gods had carried out some important act, or were simply believed to reside there. The Christians made use of the graves of buried saints and martyrs of their faith by meeting in cemeteries in the early years before they had their own buildings. As I have mentioned, saints were often a mix of borrowed pagan gods melded with Christian holy persons. If the worship of a particular local god was popular and deeply rooted in some areas, the Church simply turned that god into a saint.

Constantine built his churches on such holy sites. They were generally constructed in the shape of the pagan basilicas, which were Roman court buildings. In this way, Christian buildings avoided association with pagan religious temples. As I have mentioned, Christians had formerly met in cemeteries, often in houses owned by wealthy members and more rarely, in caves. The basilica contained an elevated platform for the clergy to officiate and a screen or rail to separate the clergy from the lay members. Early Christians had mingled in a more democratic form, but hierarchy was becoming established in Constantine's time. Many of these same early Christians had come together in the rites of the Lord's Supper, in this case, of the Kyrios Christos. Such meals, as I have mentioned, were

very common to the mystery cults. A little later, the Christian altar displayed the Eucharist chalice on it, containing the wine and bread which was supposedly transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. The altar additionally had the relics of saints embedded in it, another borrowing from the pagans.

I would like to digress a moment to try to give some approximate dates for the first mention of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper as being transubstantiated into, literally, the body and blood of Jesus. The church writers, Clement, around 96 CE, and Ignatius of Antioch, around 108 CE, both mentioned it. Justin Martyr discussed the concept and order of the rite around 150 CE. Prior to that, the very earliest manifestation of the practice would have been similar to the Lord and Lady's Suppers of the Hellenistic mystery cults. The practice of a full meal shared by the worshippers may have ceased in the Christian Church because of the growing numbers of members. There were also rumors of abuses in some churches, such as drunkenness, and hints of immoral behavior, which cannot be substantiated.

The superstitious pagan use of relics extended and intensified in the early Christian Church in 326 CE, when Constantine's mother, Helen, made a trip to Palestine, the Holy Land. She had reportedly spurred Constantine on to kill his wife and son, so the journey may have had a penitential purpose. The son was believed to have had an affair with his stepmother. Be that as it may, Helena, a dedicated Christian, was also searching for the cross and nails used to crucify Jesus. The Christian clergy obliged and the cross and nails were found. Constantine reportedly attributed magical powers to the bits of wood, just as pagans had done concerning their relics. I shall have more to say on the cross a little later.

As I mentioned earlier, most of the famous Christian churches were built over the alleged graves of the martyred apostles, such as Peter and Paul. In Bethlehem the famous Church of the Nativity was built over the site of the purported cave where Jesus had been born.

Caves were very popular birthing centers for gods- Mithras, Hermes and other gods and goddesses were born in caves, depending on which myth or its variation people believed.

Constantine built large, impressive fountains in front of the churches for people to wash and purify themselves before entering to worship. This, too, was a common practice of pagans when they entered their temples. Pagan lustral water used to

clean worshippers' hands was kept in an aspersorium. The use of water for purification before worship was a common practice in India, ancient Egypt, Etruria and parts of Greece, as well as other countries. Catholic Christians have retained the practice up to the present. They dip their hands into holy water fonts and make the sign of the cross. In recent years, at least three tests have been made of the font water and it was found to be swarming with bacteria.

Although Constantine built at least nine churches in Rome and many others all over the Western world, it was a common practice to take over pagan temples. Gregory the Great (540-604 CE) was possibly the first Christian to propose purifying pagan temples with holy water and Christian relics, thereby making them suitable for Christian use. It is a historical irony that Christians used holy water and relics, imitating pagan holy practices as they took over their buildings. But by then, the pagan religions, both state and mystery, were abolished and the ordinary Christian laity was not aware of the source of this practice of purification. The Emperor Theodosius and his priests had issued a series of decrees from 391-399 CE which forbade pagan worship, removed any privileges from pagan priests and ordered the destruction of pagan temples and holy shrines.

The Christian clergy, who had originally worn clothes like everyone else, began to dress in ceremonial robes, which were nearly exact replicas of Roman officials. Many contemporary Christians are of the mistaken opinion that their clergy's priestly vestments originated with the priestly dress of the Old Testament. They did not. The Catholic Encyclopedia itself states this fact. Until Constantine, the clergy did not dress differently from the common people. Clement of Alexandria, (150-215 CE), began to argue that the clergy should dress better than the laity. Let us keep in mind that the aforementioned liturgy was by this time a formal event. He declared that the ministers' clothes should be simple and white. Apparently, such a notion was likely borrowed from Plato, the pagan philosopher, who stated that "white was the color of the gods." Here is another historical irony. Luke, 20: 46 quotes Jesus, Christianity's founder, on dress. He was quoted as saying: "Beware of those who like to walk around in long robes." Apparently the clergy did not heed the words of their Kyrios Christos. They turned instead, to the pagan secular hierarchal order and adopted its manner of dressing. Even the Christian priest's tonsure, the partially shaved head, was borrowed from the old Roman ceremony of adoption.

Constantine was the first who used the words, clerical and clerics, to describe the higher social class. He thought the Christian clergy should have the same privileges as government officials, so bishops were allowed to sit in judgment like

the secular judges. The pagan priests had enjoyed exemption from taxes; now Constantine exempted the Christian clergy from them. In fact, the clergy even received fixed annual allowances, exemption from mandatory public office and other civic duties.

The secular courts could not try the clergy, nor did priests have to serve in the army.

Distinctions between bishop, deacon and priest also began to take place during Constantine's reign. By the time Constantine moved his capitol to Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople in 330 CE, the garb of the secular officials was matched by the dress of the priests and deacons of the Church. The clergy did not change their style of garments when the German conquests contributed to the modification of secular clothes, with many Romans beginning to wear Gothic short tunics. But the clergy wanted to emphasize their difference from the laity and continued to wear long clothes. Bishops wore purple by the 5th Century. By the 7th and 8th Centuries, the priestly vestments were considered sacred objects inherited from the robes of Levitical priests of the Old Testament. This was not the case, and Barr and Viola believe that the propagation of such a notion was a rationalization to justify the practice of elaborate and symbolic dress for the clergy. By the Middle Ages, the gradually more costly and ornate vestments took on mystical and symbolic meanings.

With time, Christians also realized that lights, scents and music made for a more dramatic worship performance. Pagan Roman emperors had lights carried before them when they made a public appearance. Accompanying the lights was a large basin of fire that had been filled with aromatic spices. Candles and the burning of incense were introduced into the Christian churches as part of the ritual and they were brought in at the same time the clergy entered the room. Services were begun with processional music which was also a formerly Roman custom.

Gibbon, in his 1879 *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, inveighed against the lights and incense of the Catholic Church as pagan, and other scholars agreed with him.

As for the music of the Christian church, Will Durant, the author of the massive *Story of Civilization*, written from 1935 to 1975, had this to say in *The Age of Faith* : "In the Middle Ages, as in Ancient Greece, the main fountainhead of drama was in religious liturgy. The Mass itself was a dramatic spectacle; the sanctuary a sacred stage; the celebrants wore symbolic costumes; priest and acolytes engaged

in dialogues; and the antiphonal responses of priest and choir, and of choir to choir, suggested precisely the same evolution of drama from dialogue that had generated the sacred Dionysian play.” Edward Dickinson, in his *The Study of the History of Music* from 1950, believed that the clergy had taken control of the hymns by bringing in a clerical staff of trained singers. The church hierarchy had discovered that the singing of hymns by the lay congregation helped the spread of heretical doctrines and they wanted to curb the practice. But this shift also emphasized the power of the clergy in becoming the main performers in the Christian drama.

Congregational singing was banned around 367 CE and professionally trained choirs replaced it. Ambrose, a church father, created orthodox hymns that were modeled on Greek modals and were actually called by Greek names. He also created the liturgical chant, the direct descendant of the pagan Roman chant, which came from ancient Sumeria.

The aforementioned Pope Gregory the Great was said to have initiated the long tradition of papal choirs, but the practice may have begun in the 8th Century.

Apparently Gregory did engage professional singers to train Christian choirs all through the Roman Empire. The choir singers had to train nine years and memorize all of the songs they sang. Christian boys’ choirs, some of which are still active, were created from picking young boys with good voices from orphanages. This practice began in Constantine’s time. The Vienna Boys’ Choir was formed in 1498 CE. Parke, in his *Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor*, states: “The pagans frequently used boy choirs in their worship, especially on festive occasions.” Another scholar states that Greco-Roman pagans believed that young boys’ voices had special powers. Later, a major contribution of the Protestant Reformation was the use of instruments and congregational singing being reintroduced into Christian services.

The funeral dirge and procession is another borrowed custom from the Greco-Roman pagans. The pagans, particularly the Romans, had a strong cult of the dead; it was impossible to satisfy the new Christians with psalms and hymns and not allow funeral dirges and processions. The church father, Tertullian (160-220 CE), was opposed to the Christian funeral procession, because he quite rightly argued that it had pagan origins.

The funeral oration emerged from the pagan custom of hiring one of the town’s most eloquent professors to speak at a loved one’s funeral. This man had a little

book that he could refer to on such occasions, often working himself up to a passionate pitch of grief. Ramsay MacMullen states that a common phrase used by such speakers about the deceased when ready to end the oration was: "He now lives among the gods, traversing the heavens and looking down on life below." Notice how similar the words are to a contemporary funeral oration.

Speaking with confidence about an afterlife was not merely the practice within the mystery cults, but a significant feature of pagan funerals.

Facts of this nature go a long way to discrediting the notion certain scholars attempt to propagate when they make the preposterous claim that the mystery religions had little concern with an afterlife, but were instead engaged with present bliss in the material world. This is nonsense. One of the most important features of religions is to hold out the promise of immortality to their members. As I have mentioned, poem after poem, song after song, from the various mystery rites that have survived emphasize the human hope and expectation of sharing in the resurrection of the god being worshipped by them.

Hugh Dowden, who tries to emphasize that the mystery cults had little interest in immortality, disproves it in his own discussion of the gold tablets found in many tombs in Thessaly, Northern Greece, Crete, Sicily and Southern Italy, small, very thin sheets of foil inscribed with writing. The oldest one is from Southern Italy around 400 BCE and many others are from the Hellenistic Era, the 4th Century, CE. Some are inscribed with directions to get to the correct spot in the afterlife. Many others contain words expressing confidence, or the prayerful hope that the deceased will be allowed by the god or the goddess to enter a blissful underworld or afterlife. Many indicate the deceased was an initiate of one or more of the mystery cults.

Let us keep in mind that an emphasis on a blissful afterlife was not unique to the Kyrios Christos mystery cult.

It was an important feature of nearly all the mystery cults of the Hellenistic culture and also a feature of the pagan civic religions, particularly the Roman state religion.

We have discussed the pagan roots of many aspects of the Christian liturgy. The sermon's origins were pagan in part. The sermon remains important to the Catholic Church and the ne plus ultra of the Protestant Church in the present day. In fact, the sermon has been the bedrock of the Protestant Church for some five

hundred years. But did it come exclusively from the practices of the prophets and the holy men of the Judaic religion? Let us examine what the Protestant sermon consists of and how it is essentially quite different from the Old Testament practices.

The Old Testament prophets or priests did not give regular speeches to the people; instead their speeches were sporadic, possibly extemporaneous and fluid. The prophets did not appear to follow a set script. Members of the audience could also interrupt and question the prophets. Norrington states that in the synagogue, preaching on a biblical text was a regular occurrence but that any member (I believe that would be confined to only males) could address the people if he wished to do so. Note that the synagogue preaching was on a specific biblical text.

So there is a slight resemblance to the Old Testament preaching in the Protestant sermon. But the contemporary Protestant sermon is basically different. It is delivered every week, a regular occurrence, by the pastor or a guest speaker to a passive audience. It is a monologue generally consisting of a specific structure- an introduction, three to five important points and a conclusion.

According to Norrington, the Jesus of the New Testament gospels was a sporadic speaker, who spoke on special occasions, addressing specific issues. His talks appeared to be contemporaneous and were often in dialogue form, with interruptions from the audience at times. The Christian form of sermon does not have its roots in the New Testament.

The roots of the modern sermon may be found in the culture of the pagan Greco-Romans of the 5th Century BCE and in the Judaic tradition. The Sophist philosophers and orators of classical Greece were wandering speakers who developed rhetoric, or the art of speaking persuasively. Their ability to sell a point of view became, after a while, more prized than their general accuracy. They could argue expertly for someone who wanted to win a court case, for instance. Many of them were atheists or agnostics. They were experts at using physical appearance, emotional arguments and selective language to win their debates. The word, sophistry, today has rather negative connotations, implying specious arguing accompanied with the use of imprecise statements. Some of the Greek Sophist philosophers had a fixed residence from which they spoke; others traveled to places for a large fee. Some of them became very well-to-do. The Jewish Rabbis, on the other hand, often took up a trade so they would not have to charge a fee for their services.

A century later, the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, added three crucial points to the practice of rhetoric. It seems simple now, but it was a breakthrough in its day. "A whole," he said, "must have a beginning, a middle and an end." Eventually, when the Romans came into contact with Greek culture, the Romans became enthralled by rhetoric. Both cultures had an obsession with hearing an eloquent orator.

The Romans often paid for a philosopher to deliver a sermonette after a fashionable dinner, according to Hatch. A brilliant orator had the celebrity status of the athletes, movie and rock stars of the present day. Both Greek and Roman societies loved the pagan sermon, just as many Christians love a rousing sermon today.

Gradually, as Christianity spread throughout the empire in the 3rd century, the travelling Christian preachers who spoke extemporaneously, according to Norrington, left the pages of Church history. Church gatherings became more liturgical than the open meetings of the early Church years and began to become fixed services, with an emerging clergy. The Church, by the 5th century CE, was fully institutionalized.

We have spoken about the advantages of becoming a Christian in the Roman Empire after Constantine's ascent. Many of the pagan orators and philosophers were converting to Christianity and importing pagan philosophy into the Church. Some of them became leading thinkers, writers and theologians of the early Church. They are known as the Church Fathers. These men began to use their skills for Christian purposes, sitting in an official chair and giving exegeses on Scriptures. According to Hatch, if one compares a 3rd Century pagan sermon with a sermon given by one of the Church Fathers, the structure and phraseology will be found to be quite similar.

There was a gradual change in the Church's emphasis- oratory began to replace conversation and the greatness of the orator began to replace any two-way dialogue between the members and the speaker. Hatch states that the sermon became the privilege of church officials, particularly the bishops.

Orators had to receive formal training for rhetoric in schools for this purpose and those without training could no longer address the congregation. By the 3rd century, Christians began to call their sermons, "homilies," which was the same term pagan Greek orators used for their discourse. It is obvious that the sermon did not originate with Christianity but was borrowed by the Church from pagan culture. With the eloquent John Chrysostom (347- 407 CE) and Augustine (354-

430 CE), the sermon reached its height in the early Christian Church. Luther, the Protestant reformer, later took Augustine as his model.

By 1523, Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) was leading a passionate Protestant revolt against the Catholic Mass. He made preaching rather than the resacrificing of Christ through the ritual of the Eucharist, the center of the Protestant service. However, Maxwell states that by the time Luther had finished with revising and altering the old Catholic ritual, his liturgy was nothing more than a truncated version of the old Catholic Mass.

Will Durant, the author of the *Story of Civilization* that I mentioned earlier, was most astute when considering the roots of Christianity. Durant was an atheist, who had earlier in his life, considered becoming a Catholic priest. If such a well-regarded scholar was able to see and understand the origins of the early Church practices, why is it that so many contemporary scholars deny, or try to deny the obvious facts? It seems, at best, misguided of them. As I mentioned earlier, some may be trying to strike a different path from earlier scholarship in order to advance their careers; others may be Christian advocates.

Some scholars, such as Bradshaw, suggested that the order of worship of the early Church was based on Jewish synagogue services. But it was not- it was totally unique to its culture, the pagan culture it arose from. The synagogues were begun either during the Babylonian captivity when members could not go to the Temple, around the 6th Century BCE, or with the ascendancy of the Pharisees during the 2nd and 3rd Centuries BCE. The synagogue became the center of Jewish religious life after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE.

What have experts discovered were the roots of the Catholic Mass if it did not originate out of the New Testament? Its origins were part Judaic and part pagan. According the Will Durant: "the Catholic Mass was based partly on the Judaic Temple Service and partly on Greek mystery rituals of purification, vicarious sacrifice and participation." He goes on to say: "The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual; the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass." According to Viola and Barna: "In effect, the Catholic Mass that emerged in the 6th Century was fundamentally pagan. Christians incorporated the vestments of the pagan priests, the use of incense and holy water in purification rites, the burning of candles in worship, the architecture of the Roman basilica for their church buildings, the law of Rome as the basis for "canon" law, the title

Pontifex Maximus for the head bishop and the pagan rituals for the Catholic Mass.”

Now I would like to turn to the sacrament of Baptism in the early Church. If you recall from the New Testament, Jesus began his career with a baptism from John the Baptist.

Joseph Campbell states: “The rite of Baptism was an ancient rite coming down from the old Sumerian temple city, Eridu, of the water god, Ea, “God of the House of Water.” In the Hellenistic period, Ea was called Oannes, which is in Greek, Ioannes, Latin Johannes, Hebrew Yohanan, and in English, John. Several scholars have suggested, therefore, that there was never either a historical Jesus or John, but only a water god and a sun god.” Jesus was said to be born in the astronomical sign of Capricorn. For the ancients, this sign represented the gate of souls out of incarnation into immortality. The birthday of Jesus is celebrated on the pagan festival of the Returning Sun on December 25. The birthday of John the Baptist is celebrated in June, replacing a pagan midsummer festival of water.”

According to Freke and Gandy, baptism was a central rite in the mystery religions. Inge maintains that the old Homeric Hymns made mention of the fact that ritual purity was necessary for salvation and that people were baptized to wash away all their previous wrongdoing. Freke and Gandy quote other scholars who state that the *Pyramid Texts* show there was a liturgical baptism of the Egyptian pharaoh before the ceremony of his ritual birth as the embodiment of Osiris, the dying and reviving god of Egypt. Some of the mystery rites merely involved the sprinkling of water on the initiates to baptize them, and we know by the baptism tanks found at pagan initiation halls and shrines that some of the mysteries required complete immersion.

The Eleusinian mysteries, that nearly rivaled the state religions in ancient Athens, required initiates to ritually cleanse themselves in the sea. The 2nd century writer, Lucius Apuleius, underwent a purifying bath when initiated, and then later, a baptism of sprinkling.

The mysteries of Mithras required initiates to undergo repeated baptisms to wash away their sins. However, it is somewhat unclear if water was ever used, or the blood of a slaughtered bull. The god, Mithras, slew a bull as his greatest conquest, and later feasted with the sun god in celebration. Robert Price shrewdly states: “Brother, have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?”- from an old Christian hymn. Mithraic initiates who could not afford a bull to slaughter, were allowed to have a cheaper sheep sacrificed and its blood poured or sprinkled over them. Such

baptismal initiations both took place in March or April, exactly when the Christians in later centuries baptized new converts, called catechumens.

The similarity between the Christian and pagan rites could not be ignored by the early Church Fathers. Tertullian wrote: "In certain Mysteries (he means mystery religion rites), it is by baptism that members are initiated, and they imagine that the result of this baptism is regeneration and the remission of the penalties of their sins." Presumably, Christians did not imagine the same thing. Tertullian was wide of the mark with such a statement.

In Romans, Paul discussed the three symbolic results from a baptism of total immersion. Death, he said, was signified by entering the water, burial was symbolized when one became immersed by it, and when one emerged from the water, one was resurrected. There was little difference between the other mystery rites, which also represented death and resurrection, from the Christian one. In fact, many Christians put off baptism until on their death beds, in the hope of the sacrament cleansing them of all their sins.

In the early Church, the newly baptized initiates were given a white robe, a new name, and a taste of honey. Honey is a liminal substance, according to the anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss. He discussed its properties in his 1964 volume, *The Raw and the Cooked*. Honey is raw but tastes as though it has been through a civilized cooking process and is sweet to the taste, as well. In the Mithras mysteries, initiates had honey poured on their hands and put on their tongues. Many pagans did the same to new-born babies.

There is very little difference between written pagan descriptions of baptism and written Christian ones. Christian initiates went to baptism naked, according to Freke and Gandy, then put on white robes and marched to the basilica in a procession, wearing a crown on their heads and a candle in their hands. The initiates in the procession at Eleusis in honor of Demeter, Persephone and Dionysius carried torches, wore crowns and sang hymns on their way to the sanctuary. As I have mentioned, such similarities were very disturbing to many Christians, especially some of the Church Fathers. They generally resorted to the "diabolic mimicry" argument, which they brought out frequently. Evil demons, they claimed, had instigated some sort of parody of Christian baptism into mystery rites. The Church Fathers often cited diabolical mimicry to explain away their religion's ceremonies similarity to pagan ones.

If you recall, the rites of Eleusis at Athens honored Demeter, Persephone and the

wine god, Dionysius. Initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries cleansed themselves in the sea for their important yearly rite, which involved thousands of people. They carried piglets, which they cleansed and then sacrificed.

Later, the initiates went through a ceremony where they were mocked by people before entering the sanctuary. The god, Dionysius, was mocked in variants of his myths, with terrible punishments being leveled at his tormentors. This, of course, brings to mind Jesus being mocked on the way to Gethsemane.

Some scholars believe that the sacrificing of the pigs may have been symbolic of the initiates leaving behind, or surmounting, their animal nature and taking on a new spirituality. The Gnostics also believed that man's body must be sloughed off and the spiritual must take precedence. The second aspect of the Eleusinian mysteries that has some resonance with the Jesus mythological narrative has to do once again with the pigs. In the New Testament, Jesus cast the demons from a possessed man into a herd of swine, after which the pigs jumped into the sea.

Let us keep in mind that the Eleusinian mystery was in the honor of Demeter, the goddess who made the vegetation of the earth grow, and of Persephone, her daughter, who was stolen from Demeter by Hades, the god of the underworld, and of the dead. Demeter mourned and searched for her daughter, neglecting the earth, which was left barren. Hades was ultimately allowed to keep Persephone six months of the year and Demeter enjoyed her daughter the other six. That was the mythological explanation for the dying and reviving seasons on the earth. After a while, the god, Dionysius, was appropriately added to the mystery celebrations, as he was a dying and reviving god of wine.

Interestingly, according to Freke and Gandy, on the march to the shrine outside Eleusis, a donkey was loaded with the various paraphernalia to be used during the mystery rites.

Jesus also made his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, according to Christian sources. Whether this parallel is coincidental because donkeys were used as transportation and bearing loads of goods in the ancient world, or if, as Freke and Gandy theorize, the donkey represented symbolically the animal nature which humans must overcome, the similarities between the pagan and Christian practices are striking and tantalizing. The resemblance between the two was why the Christian Church Fathers had to claim the pagan rites were diabolical mimicry. From about the 8th Century BCE, the shrine at Eleusis was occupied and the Eleusinian mysteries were practiced, according to Hugh Bowden, for over a

thousand years, until 395 CE, when the Goths sacked it. How the Eleusinian rites could mimic Christian baptismal rites when the Eleusinian mysteries pre-dated Christianity is surely a divine mystery. Apparently, some Christian theologians believed, however, that the devil had begun the work of diabolic mimicry before the coming of Christ.

In “The Pagan Roots of the Virgin Mary and of Jesus,” at atheistscholar.org, I have discussed the Hellenistic era’s Lords’ and Ladies’ Suppers, which many mystery cults celebrated, including the Kryios Christos cult. Please see that lecture for more discussion concerning the suppers. I would, however, like to elaborate on the bread and wine which Jesus was said to have offered to his disciples to eat and drink at the Last Supper before his crucifixion. He was said to have announced to them that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood.

Dionysius, the Greek god, was associated with the vine and wines for many centuries prior to the Jesus myth. In some of his variants, he is killed and dismembered, symbolic of wine being trodden and the juice flowing like red blood.

The point of partaking of the bread and wine, changed by the sacrament of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ, is to have communion with the god. But this Christian rite has roots deep into the past, as far back as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, as noted by the eminent Greek Egyptologist, Wallace Budge. Deceased Egyptians were depicted as eating the gods and so imbuing their powers. The uninitiated who did not understand such rites in the ancient world accused the mysteries of practicing cannibalism. The same charge, according to Burkert, was leveled at the early Christians.

Joseph Campbell and Carpenter and Farrone state that to “drink wine in the rites of Dionysius was to commune with the god and take his power and physical presence into one’s body.” Euripides said that Dionysius became the wine and was himself poured “as an offering.” Bread and wine are shown in front of Dionysius on some ancient vases. Initiates to his mystery were offered a cake, as well as bread and wine, symbolizing blessedness, similar to the Catholic concept and practice of offering communicants a wafer. The Roman god, Mithras, who was originally a god from Persia, also had a mystery that consisted of mystic formulas being pronounced over bread and a cup, and then given to the initiates to partake of. Sometimes they were also offered a wafer. Justin Martyr, 100- 165 CE, was another Church Father who believed the other mystery religions both imitated the Christian Eucharist, and mimicked Jesus’ command to the apostles. He insisted that wicked demons had given Mithras’ followers the same command.

Here is an interesting inscription quoted by John Goodwin. "He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation." Goodwin states that the inscription is from the rites of Mithras. Catholic Christians up to the present day believe that in the Eucharist, the bread and wine literally becomes the flesh and blood of Jesus. Apparently so did some initiates of mysteries, which had various types of "Holy Communion." Cicero, the Roman philosopher and orator, attempted to explain to these superstitious initiates, that the equation of the bread and wine was symbolic only. He wrote: "Is anybody so mad as to believe that the food he eats is actually a god?"

Dionysius was often associated with the changing of water into wine. I am quoting some of the instances. "The night of January 5 was also the time when Dionysius was believed to miraculously change water into wine. According to the ancient author Pliny, on the island of Andros a stream of wine flowed in the temple of Dionysius and continued for seven days, but if samples were taken out of the sanctuary they immediately turned to water. On Naxos a spring miraculously issued forth fragrant wine."

During the yearly festival of Thyia, three empty basins were placed in a room in front of everyone, foreigners and citizens. Then the room would be locked and sealed. If anyone in the crowd desired, they could add their own seal to the others. The following day showed the seals to be unbroken, but the three basins had been miraculously filled with wine. "The author, Pausanius, wrote that citizens and foreigners vouched for the reliability of the miracle under oath."

Now I would like to discuss the numinous Christian symbol of the cross. It is well known that the cross had a long history in many countries and religions before Christianity appropriated it. The Bibliography at the end of this lecture at atheistscholar.org lists some sources concerning the history of the cross and its significance in the ancient world. But what of the Christian mythology of the cross? It is quite possible that if Jesus' crucifixion was a true historical event, he could have been nailed or tied to a stake without a crossbar. Crucifixions were carried out in several different ways. Some portions of the New Testament, if not forgeries, claim that Jesus was hung on a tree.

Firmicus Maternus, a Church Father from the 4th century, wrote that in the mysteries of Attis, an image of that god was tied to a pine tree. Maternus had received an excellent education in pagan works and philosophy before converting to Christianity. Additionally, it is known that Adonis was called: "He on the Tree."

A large, bearded man representing Dionysius was hung on a wooden pole during some of the Dionysian mysteries. In the Jesus myth, Jesus is given wine mixed with gall to drink. The Hierophant, who represented Dionysius, drank gall at the Dionysian mysteries, while the initiates were given wine.

We do not know if Plato was referring to Dionysius when he wrote about the “just man crucified.” Some pagan gods were described as appearing in the sky with outstretched arms, making their own bodies a shape with a cross bar. Justin Martyr claimed that the pagan philosopher had written about a doctrine in which the “Son of God was placed crosswise in the Universe.” This claim was made in a chapter of one of Justin’s books, entitled “Plato’s Doctrine of the Cross.”

Plato was likely talking about the Demiurge, who created the earth, or perhaps the Logos, the word, itself.

Justin was trying to claim that even the great pagan philosopher had intimations of Jesus and such writings and beliefs had prepared people for Jesus Christ, the true god man. Such a claim is obviously untrue. Nevertheless, it is a tantalizing morsel to ponder. The Church Fathers, when not using the diabolical mimicry argument, often fell back on the notion that earlier stories which had resemblances to the myth of Jesus were a preparation for the world when the one god would appear. Some theologians still seriously discuss Plato’s words as though he had been speaking of Jesus.

For more on the philosopher Plato’s large contributions to the idea of Christian Gothic cathedral of the late Middle Ages, to his influence on Gnostic and mainstream Christianity, please see both the Freke and Gandy volume and the Viola and Barna book listed in the Bibliography to this lecture. The two volumes contain fascinating expositions of the Platonic influence on Christianity.

Christianity has attempted to cast itself as unique, and true, as opposed to other belief systems. In its attempt to achieve hegemony and power, it very early on tried to present itself as one perfect and unchanging unit. To do this, it necessarily was driven to persecute and kill, not only people of different faiths, but of Christians who were not in sympathy with it. To that end, heretics, apostates and others were hunted down and wiped out. In the early days of the Church, Gnostics, Cathars and other sects were ruthlessly persecuted and obliterated.

The Church had to rid itself of pagan rivals and of its resemblance to them, had to erase its borrowing from them. It searched out pagans with vicious brutality.

Pagan prophets were tortured until they admitted that their gods were “frauds.” Priests were chained to their shrines and left to starve to death. Pagans were tortured until they admitted to the false charges that they had sacrificed children and other fantasy crimes. As mentioned earlier, some ancient shrines were razed to the ground, often with churches built over them or simply allowed to stand, purified and taken over by Christian churches. Pagan literature was decimated.

According to MacMullen, one witness wrote: “Innumerable bodies were piled together, many heaps of volumes drawn from various houses to be burned due to the opinion of the judges as prohibited. Owners burnt their entire libraries. So great was the terror that seized everyone.”

The Church did not want to portray the pagan religions as merely untrue, but to depict them as created by demons, gods who worked magic to deceive the gullible. It wanted to be perceived as the one true faith and to bring that perception about, worked tirelessly to destroy the knowledge of and memory of the mystery cults. Those cults bore too much resemblance to the Church, many of whose hierarchy knew that it was an imitation church they served, with rites and beliefs taken from the pagan and Judaic religions. The Church engaged in a huge cover-up, not only with the destruction of its rivals, but with the construction of a revised and largely false history of its origins. When people disputed this concocted history, they were simply done away with or frightened into silence.

For a while, few dared to oppose the Church. But truth can only be suppressed for a while. Eventually the Renaissance emerged in Europe, then the Protestant Reformation and then the Enlightenment. Reason and the scientific method began to prevail. But religion is still strong, and still clings to its outworn belief system. Christianity is a deadly shark missing a few of the sharp teeth with which it would impose its belief system on the world. Religion, all religion, not just Christianity, has been backed into a corner by science, sociology, neuroscience, and the modern world. Let us, in the Western world, by means of truth, both historical and scientific truth, open the back door where it continues to linger, and send it out into the darkness it would perpetuate if it had the strength.

Video of Lecture: Christianity's Pagan Roots

Lecture: Christianity's Pagan Roots

Video of Discussion: Christianity's Pagan Roots

Discussion: Christianity's Pagan Roots

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There are more references after the lecture, [*The Pagan Roots of Jesus and Mary*](#).

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